

Deterrence in Professional Military Education

Paul I. Bernstein*

It is now commonplace to hear or read about the urgent need for fresh thinking on deterrence and for rebuilding the intellectual and analytic enterprise that produced concepts which guided the West through the existential dangers of the Cold War. We hear this admonition from senior civilian and military leaders, subject-matter experts, and commentators—and we hear it with good reason. No one paying attention would disagree that we face deterrence challenges that are different and in some ways more complex than those we encountered in the Cold War or even the first phase of the post-Cold War period. In the emerging security environment, we confront a broader array of antagonists armed with a wider range of conventional and unconventional capabilities; consequently, we must consider the possibility of crises and conflicts with which we have little experience and that could unfold in ways difficult to predict and rehearse. Questions that preoccupied us during the Cold War—how to promote stability, deter nuclear attacks, and manage the risks of escalation—are still with us, although in very new contexts that now encompass novel factors such as cyber weapons and “hybrid warfare.”

The institutional response to this set of challenges in the Department of Defense (DOD) is a work in progress in key areas such as concept development, planning, capabilities, leader awareness, and education. We have made progress in acquiring a stronger understanding of adversary doctrine and developing deterrence concepts that can guide operational planning; moreover, complex escalation scenarios increasingly are the focus of tabletops and war games in the strategic forces community. Nevertheless, significant deficits exist at the regional level, where geographical combatant commands still struggle to understand how conventional conflicts could escalate to the nuclear level and what that would mean for US campaign plans. Important emerging concepts for regional deterrence and defense quite rightly address such issues as conventional power projection in contested operational envi-

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ronments, but they have yet to wrestle adequately with the ways in which these concepts could shape—or be shaped by—regional nuclear dynamics. Slowly, awareness of these considerations is growing in the necessary communities, as is the recognition that any assessment of future capabilities to underwrite deterrence and defense must account for those that can deliver advantages not only in power projection but in all aspects of strategic warfare.

Professional military education (PME), however, lags in the attention it gives to contemporary deterrence problems. One reason for this is that senior-level guidance to the PME community does not emphasize or even call out these issues. The Officer Professional Military Education Policy (OPMEP), issued by the Joint Staff, provides a comprehensive framework for officer education across the strategic, operational, and tactical domains but curiously fails to highlight the need to teach deterrence in the PME classroom.¹ One could argue that deterrence is an implied topic nested under any number of specific learning objectives defined in the policy. One could argue with equal validity, though, that the absence of an explicit emphasis on deterrence generally and regional nuclear deterrence in particular represents a significant gap that negatively affects the content of education. Indeed, my colleagues and I have been told by a number of current and retired senior military leaders that they had not been adequately prepared for the deterrence and escalation issues they encountered in regional command posts.

Senior leadership is providing, at best, only a weak “demand signal” that would give PME schools the impetus to adapt their core curricula to include vital content on deterrence, escalation, cross-domain conflict, and crisis management under the nuclear shadow. These programs of instruction generally are fully committed to existing OPMEP requirements, and efforts to introduce new content often meet resistance from administrators and faculty. To the author's knowledge, there has been no recent formal review of the PME system to assess how senior and intermediate joint and service schools address deterrence. Certainly, deterrence is not completely neglected in core curricula, yet substantial engagement in the PME community indicates that across the system as a whole, deterrence is treated neither in depth nor systematically as a major learning objective. Although individual academic or research faculty are free to offer electives, even first-rate elective classes—and good examples of them exist—reach only a relatively small number of students.

Some institutions are further along than others. For example, the Air Force has established critical thinking on deterrence and assurance as a pillar of the “flight plan” for its nuclear enterprise. The goal is to sustain a formal program that will develop a cadre of Airmen with comprehensive knowledge of strategic deterrence and assurance theory, practice, and experience. Air University offers supporting courses such as a two-term elective consisting of intensive seminar discussion, field study, and independent research on nuclear strategy, technology, and policy. A professional continuing education program provides classroom instruction to individuals working in the nuclear enterprise, from junior officers to senior military and civilian leaders. At the Naval War College, the competitive Mahan Scholars program gives students an enhanced learning experience in strategic deterrence and escalation in the context of US national strategy and the conventional, nuclear,

cyber, and space domains. It includes 90 hours of classroom engagement and a major research product.

Programs like these are vital to the overall goal of ensuring that PME treats deterrence in a serious and systematic way and should be encouraged. However, they are only one part of the solution. A comprehensive approach should include the following.

- *Revise the Guidance.* The next review and revision of the OPMEP should state an explicit requirement with respect to deterrence. Doing so will send a critical demand signal to the PME community that leadership wishes to see meaningful content on these issues. Realistically, though, the opportunity to take this step likely will not occur for a few years as a revised OPMEP was issued in May 2015. It is important that a range of other actions be pursued until the next revision process is undertaken. As an example, contemporary deterrence issues should be designated a Special Area of Emphasis in PME for the forthcoming academic year and beyond.²
- *Objectively Assess Gaps.* Leadership should commission a formal, comprehensive review of how deterrence is addressed in core curricula at joint and service intermediate and senior schools as well as general officer / flag officer activities such as Pinnacle and Capstone. This review should also consider looking at primary and precommissioning venues, such as the service academies. An existing senior advisory body or an ad hoc blue ribbon-style panel should conduct this review, and a senior leader such as the vice-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff should commission it. Alternatively, the commander of US Strategic Command (STRATCOM) should use his existing authorities to commission such a study by an appropriate body. Work in this area by the Commander's Strategic Advisory Group may provide a useful starting point. Any review should consider the idea of naming a DOD organizational focal point for deterrence education.
- *Develop a Plan and Supporting Resources.* STRATCOM should take the lead in preparing a plan to strengthen the deterrence content of PME and in developing instructional materials that would support execution. The plan should allow for flexible application by faculties and be modular in nature so that instructors have a menu of resources to consider. This suggests making available model programs of instruction or lesson plans that could be adopted (and adapted as needed) by faculty. One type of curriculum could be tailored for integration into the core, another could support electives, and yet another could focus on candidate tabletop exercises. All could be supplemented by reading lists and other resources for faculty and students, such as a "deterrence primer" that captures essential readings, concepts, and analytic tools. It may also make sense to create an informal reachback resource for faculty who seek advice and assistance.
- *Advocate for Deterrence Education.* The STRATCOM commander and other senior leaders should be forceful advocates for deterrence-related education, both publicly and in the councils of the DOD. Speeches, public presentations, and testimony by these leaders should emphasize the importance of addressing



deterrence in formal and informal classrooms. Any revision or update to the Deterrence Operations Joint Operating Concept should note the importance of teaching deterrence in PME.

- *Nurture Talent.* An effort should be made to identify future leaders at PME schools who are interested in deterrence and related issues. These students should receive opportunities to devote a portion of their work to these topics. At National Defense University (NDU), so-called scholars programs engage students who have expressed a desire to pursue issues of interest to US Pacific and European Commands. These students commit to conduct research and take electives on these topics and are provided research resources and an opportunity to present their findings to leadership. A similar NDU program in collaboration with STRATCOM to focus on deterrence and related issues has been proposed and is under active consideration.
- *Gather the Community.* An annual deterrence education workshop would offer a regular opportunity for PME faculty to share experiences and best practices. Such a workshop could include both formal and informal educators from the civilian academic, think tank, and nongovernmental organization communities. A deterrence education workshop could occur on the margins of STRATCOM's annual deterrence symposium, or as an alternative to a formal workshop, STRATCOM could consider making a discussion of deterrence and PME a permanent feature of that symposium.
- *Don't Forget Continuing Education and Professional Development.* Formal PME is only part of the equation. Equally important are joint and service vehicles for continuing education and professional development that need not be associated with degree-granting PME schools. A pressing need exists to give junior-, mid-, and senior-level officers and civilians opportunities to learn, stay current, and engage with their leadership. Further, this is one way of filling gaps in the formal PME system. The aforementioned Air Force program for professional continuing education on nuclear deterrence is a useful model—one that should be followed in the joint community, which already offers courses for general and flag officers in cyberspace, information, and special operations. Even less formal professional development opportunities are important as well. Many of these exist across the DOD, but it is not clear how well such disparate activities address deterrence. A good model for working-level professionals is the Strategic Policy Overview program managed by the Air Force Institute for National Security Studies for the Air Staff.
- *Encourage and Leverage PME Research.* At all PME schools, but especially those with strong research enterprises, research faculty and subject-matter experts should be encouraged to address deterrence in their work, which can be a vital source of conceptual and practical insight to decision makers. PME institutions should also actively promote the timely integration of faculty research on deterrence into the classroom. Doing so may be the norm at some schools, but it should become a routine and deliberate practice wherever possible. Analytic activities performed outside the PME community also should

migrate to the classroom. This could include results of senior-level war games and the work of STRATCOM's Strategic Deterrence Assessment Laboratory, to cite two possibilities.

Recently, senior leaders have called for greater institutional rigor in PME, noting that education is a key line of effort to offset competitors' military capabilities and that our PME system is a strategic asset and an asymmetric advantage. To an educator and practitioner in the deterrence field, it seems self-evident that pressing this advantage must entail active engagement on the critical issues affecting deterrence and regional conflict. A "real-time" indicator of whether the DOD shares this view may come soon, as the military departments, in coordination with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Office of the Secretary of Defense, undertake a study to identify policy and resource approaches to ensure that PME graduates are properly prepared to understand and contend with the doctrine and capabilities of increasingly sophisticated adversaries. Findings of this study were to be briefed to the deputy secretary of defense and vice-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in late July 2015. ★

Notes

1. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction 1800.01E, *Officer Professional Military Education Policy (OPMEP)*, 29 May 2015, http://www.dtic.mil/cjcs_directives/.
2. For reference, the 2014 PME Special Areas of Emphasis were Profession of Arms; Women, Peace and Security; Security Force Assistance; and Building Partnership Capacity.



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